

Detroit Free Press

Editorial: Call to unionize U-M research assistants makes little sense

By staff writer

Detroit Free Press

May 27, 2011 ET

You can be pro-labor -- as we generally are on this editorial page -- while still appreciating the effective limits of collective bargaining and understanding that it isn't appropriate for every environment that nominally involves work.

But those fine distinctions are lost right now on the University of Michigan Board of Regents, which last week voted to allow research assistants -- students who work alongside professors as part of their coursework -- to form a union.

U-M President Mary Sue Coleman, once a research assistant herself as well as a professor working with student research assistants, perfectly captured the sheer incongruity of the board's decision.

The move could "fundamentally alter the relationship between faculty and graduate students," Coleman said. Research assistants are not employees of the university, but students, she said. They "learn from the researchers with whom they work and go on to even greater discoveries as they take ownership of their shared scholarly study and then build on it."

As Coleman points out, the work of graduate research assistants is completely different from that of graduate student instructors, who work with lots of different professors to meet teaching needs at the university. "Research assistant hiring is done at the level of the faculty member, based on a matching process between the interest of the faculty and the interest of the student," Coleman said.

Coleman's fear, of course, is that unionizing research assistants could make the experience unappealing to both professors and top-level students, which could cost the university dearly. Much of U-M's prestige and important public contribution to this state is anchored in its profoundly respected research community.

And in terms of sheer dollars, the university is one of the largest contributors to the local economy, as well.

It's notable that no other research university on par with the University of Michigan has union agreements for its graduate researchers.

It's troubling that the Board of Regents (dominated by Democrats whose nominations to the board are deeply influenced by the state's unions) undertook such a dramatic change with an odd, last-minute addition to its agenda last week, and that it did so without a broad discussion among the people at the university who'd be affected.

This was sandbagging, for sure -- an expansion of union membership without much thought to the consequences at the university.

It's key that Coleman opposes the move, as does the university provost. The board should reconsider, before its decision damages one of the university's most treasured areas of excellence.

Source: Detroit Free Press

KATHLEEN GALLIGAN/Detroit Free Press